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Mia Stainsby, Postmedia News · Jun. 4, 2011 | Last Updated: Jun. 4, 2011 4:15 AM ET

In nature, most predators go after weaker individuals because they're easier to catch, says Mike McDermid, manager of the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise Program.

But as predators in the oceans, we North Americans go for the biggest, fastest, strongest of fish: the halibut, the salmon, the cod.

In fact, we've fished out the large-species cod. "When in some cases predators have been restricted, the small fish thrive because they don't have the predator concentration," McDermid says.

All the more reason to start including smaller bait fish in our diets - fish like sardines, anchovies, mackerel and herring. Daniel Pauly, of the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre and the Sea Around Us Project, says small fish are under-utilized or wasted. A third of such catch is turned into fish meal, he says.

"Basically, for North Americans, the ideal fish has been bland white fish that can be used as a basis for sauces. They don't like the taste of fish. It's been easy to cook, white and flaky. In the '50s, the British wouldn't eat shrimp or scampi and called them insects," he says. "Little fish, on the other hand, have intense flavour and lots of Omega-3 oils and [edible] bones, which are good for you."

Also, Pauly says, small fish don't have "accumulated nasties like heavy metals and pollutants like dioxins and PCBs from industrial processes."

Canada became a net seafood importer 10 years ago, he says, a good reason to utilize more of our local, small fish.

"We are a poor fish culture," McDermid agrees. "Chefs laugh and say the perfect fish for North America is flaky and tastes like nothing. We're not open to trying things."

In Vancouver, C restaurant and Blue Water Cafe have been at the forefront in leading us into temptation with the unfamiliar.

Frank Pabst, the chef at Blue Water Cafe, features an Unsung Heroes menu once a year, and is helping to remove the "yuck" factor from sea cucumber, sea urchin, jellyfish. The Unsung Heroes menu has also featured mackerel, sardines, herring roe, anchovies, Humboldt squid, barnacles and periwinkles.

When Pabst first started Unsung Heroes seven years ago, he might have sold two or three such dishes a night. Now, he sells 50 to 60.

With sea cucumber, which can have crunch, he has chopped it with oysters, snow peas, shiitake mushrooms, bean sprouts and made a spring roll. He served mackerel with baba ghanouj to give it familiarity; white anchovy was served as a play on Caesar salad in a garlic parsley marinade with Parmesan custard and a fennel and romaine heart salad. He put sardines in a crostini-like blanket with pine nut gremolata and pan-fried it in olive oil.

"I wanted to stick to my style of cooking without hiding their flavours," he says. "It makes sense to protect species that are being overfished and to make sure they're around so our grandchildren can enjoy them."

Says McDermid: "It's about seeing people open up to more under-utilized species. But the No. 1 thing is how responsibly the fishery is handled. The best place to start is at a good restaurant."

GRILLED MACKEREL WITH CHUNKY ROMESCO SAUCE

From The Blue Water Cafe Seafood cookbook by Frank Pabst

ROMESCO SAUCE

The Romesco sauce is best made the day before you plan to serve it.

6/6/2011

Off the hook!

4 red bell peppers

2 ripe Roma tomatoes

2 tbsp (30 mL) raw almonds

2 tbsp (30 mL) raw hazelnuts

2 tbsp (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil

2 tbsp (30 mL) focaccia bread crumbs

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 shallot, minced

3 tbsp (45 mL) aged sherry vinegar

1 tbsp (15 mL) Spanish paprika

1 tsp (5 mL) esepette pepper

Handful of fresh flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped

GRILLED MACKEREL

4 mackerel fillets, each 4 1/2 ounces (130 g), skin on but deboned

3 tbsp (45 mL) olive oil

1 lemon, in wedges

8 green onions, white and green parts

4 thin slices of focaccia bread

1 clove garlic

1. Preheat a grill to high. Place red bell peppers directly on the grill and cook until the skins are lightly charred on all sides. Remove from the heat, place in a covered bowl and allow to cool. Using a sharp knife, remove and discard the peel and seeds, then finely chop peppers.
2. Fill a bowl with ice water. Bring a small pot of water to a boil on high heat. Add tomatoes and blanch for 10 seconds, then plunge them into the ice bath. Peel the tomatoes, cut them in half and discard the seeds, then dice into small cubes.
3. Preheat the oven to 375F (180C). Place almonds and hazelnuts on a baking sheet and toast nuts for 4 minutes. Remove from the oven, allow to cool, then rub the nuts with a kitchen towel to remove the loose skins. Roughly chop the nuts.
4. Heat olive oil in a small sauté pan on medium heat. Add breadcrumbs and garlic, and toast until golden and crispy, about 2 minutes. Add chopped nuts, red bell peppers, tomatoes, shallot and vinegar. Season with paprika, salt and esepette pepper, then cook for 10 minutes, stirring frequently.
5. Remove from the heat and allow to cool slightly.
6. In a blender or a food processor, puree 1/3 of this mixture. Stir this purée back into the sauce. Add parsley and set aside to cool.
7. Preheat a grill to high. Brush mackerel with 1/2 tablespoon (8 mL) olive oil, season with salt and pepper and grill, skinside down, for two minutes. Turn the fish over and grill for 30 seconds more. Transfer fish to a plate and squeeze with fresh lemon juice.
8. Brush green onions with 1/2 tablespoon olive oil and grill until lightly browned. Season with salt and pepper.
9. Heat 2 tablespoons (30 mL) of olive oil in a sauté pan on medium heat.
10. Add focaccia slices and pan-fry on both sides until golden brown and crunchy, or for approximately 2 minutes. Drain on paper towels to absorb the excess moisture, then rub croutons with garlic.

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Off the hook!

11. Place a mackerel filet on each plate. Arrange a slice of focaccia beside the fish. Top the focaccia with two tablespoons of Romesco sauce and 2 green onions.

Makes 4 servings.

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